Kicks x Cliques:
Exploring the Intersection of Sneaker Culture and Mental Health in the Black Community

by

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Submitted to the Program in Media Arts and Sciences, School of Architecture and Planning, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Media Arts and Sciences

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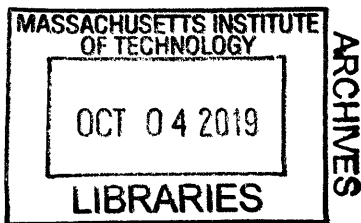
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Abstract:

Mental health is an issue affecting a wide range of people, yet treatment and engagement levels for various multicultural groups are particularly low. With the United States becoming more diverse, there exists a need for more inclusive approaches to engagement. This thesis explores how a culturally relevant approach to mental health may impact conversations relating to the topic of Black mental health. With the prominence and cultural significance of sneakers, this work seeks to highlight its influence on destigmatizing mental health in the Black community. The methodology of this research is presented in three phases: rapid ethnography, a footwear design workshop, and a social media campaign. With each phase influencing the direction of the research, we utilized the results of the social media campaign to measure its impact on #blackmentalhealth conversations on Twitter. Several tweets relating to Black mental health were gathered from the platform to be evaluated using sentiment analysis techniques. This evaluation presented how the sentiments shared during the social media campaign contributed positively to the discussion on the platform. The perspective of sneakers provided more personal narratives of mental health that extended beyond inspiration quotes and mental health events. It is our hope that this work motivates others to consider the importance of cultural inclusion when pursuing various methods of engagement – whether in relation to mental health or other important issues.

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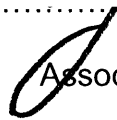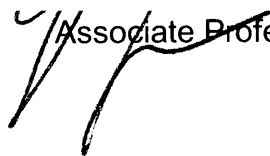
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"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, . . ." – Ephesians 3:20

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Chapter 1:
Overview

1.1 Introduction

Mental health is arguably one of the most increasingly discussed topics within today's society. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), approximately 1 in 5 (46.6 million) adults across the nation experience mental illness in a given year ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). The illness does not discriminate against whom it chooses to affect; however, specific populations within the United States are impacted by the issue at rates significantly higher when compared to other groups. The purpose of this research is to explore innovative ways to increase engagement with mental health in the African American community. African Americans represent a community who is among those affected by mental health at higher rates, and the stigma existing within the community has prevented individuals from addressing the topic and/or seeking treatment. In this thesis, I argue that the lack of engagement from African Americans may partially be attributed to the lack of cultural connection and competence relating to mental health. This work aims to leverage the prominence of the sneaker, a cultural artifact within African American culture, to help destigmatize the conversation about mental health in the African American community.

Since the 1970s, sneaker culture has blossomed into the cultural movement it is today. Many may be aware of the sneaker industry's economic success, but its thriving cultural community is at times overlooked. Due to its significance within African American history and culture, I chose to investigate how the two seemingly opposite topics of mental health and sneakers could collaborate and impact one another. In this thesis, the investigated problem is: "How can sneakers help destigmatize the conversation surrounding mental health in the Black community?" I argue that the cultural connection of sneakers combined with mental health can establish a bridge between the two topics to lessen the stigma associated with mental health and increase African American engagement.

To test the proposed hypothesis, the method was divided into three phases: rapid ethnographic research at a sneaker convention, a footwear design workshop, and a social media collaboration with footwear and mental health. Each phase influenced the next through an analysis of its results. The results of the final phase (the social media collaboration or campaign) were analyzed by querying tweets from Twitter and applying sentiment analysis techniques to measure the level of impact sneakers can have on destigmatizing Black mental health. In addition, the analysis evaluates how discussing mental health can also impact conversation(s) centered around sneakers. The two topics do not have to be mutually exclusive, but instead can work together and influence each other.

The focus of this research, engagement with mental health through the cultural connection of sneakers, is motivated by the tradition of exclusion etched in the history of the United States of America. As "new census population projections confirm the importance of racial minorities as the primary demographic engine of the nation's future growth" (Frey, 2018) – this research can open the door to consider more inclusive and unconventional ways to engage demographics that are oftentimes left at the margins in various fields, activities, and processes. Seeking to engage all groups of people, despite their background, contributes greatly to our national and global society – which affects our individual livelihoods. Additionally, this thesis work also extends the influence of sneakers beyond capital by soliciting community participation to act in addressing a societal issue.

1.2 Motivation

A Multicultural America

By the year 2045, the United States of America will be a majority-minority country (US Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2016). This partially means that the nation's demographics will be distributed in a way that no one racial group will numerically be considered the majority, as shown in Figure 1.

3.8% 0.9%

7.9%

13.1%

49.7%

24.6%

White* Hispanic Black* Asian* Multiracial* Other*

*Non-Hispanic members of race

Source: William H Frey analysis of U.S. Census
population projections released March 13, 2018
and revised September 6, 2018

B | Metropolitan Policy Program
at BROOKINGS

Figure 1-1. Racial profile of U.S. Population, 2045 (Frey, 2018)

Projecting to occur in less than 25 years, this shift will cause the country to be as diverse as its ever been. The following figure illustrates the annual population growth levels up to the year 2060 – during which "the aging white population will see a modest immediate gain through 2024, and then experience a long-term decline through 2060" (Frey, 2018). Minority populations will experience the highest growth rate.

Annual growth of total, minority, and white populations
2018 - 2060

Figure 1-2. Annual growth of total, minority, and white populations (Frey, 2018)

The shift also has a profound impact on the identity of America and it being reimagined as a place evenly comprised of different variations of races, genders, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. This thesis research, although not focused directly on inclusion, is motivated by today's increasingly multicultural America. The 240-year-old history of the United States, traditionally rooted in white superiority, must adapt to this evolving America to be the "more perfect Union" it is expected to be.

Western culture has served as the foundation of America since the nation's founding. It has been the basis for how the country operates, while controlling each realm of power within it. In this thesis, I provide examples of how exclusion within various fields has

significantly impacted many demographics, including the African American community. I have chosen to include this section to provide background information relating to exclusion, in order to address the importance of exploring new ways to engage different cultural groups that are a part of our evolving society. This includes engagement from those of every age, race, culture, etc. – which should be done continuously.

> "Minorities will be the source of all of the growth in the nation's youth and working age population, most of the growth in its voters, and much of the growth in its consumers and tax base as far into the future as we can see. Hence, the more rapidly growing, largely white senior population will be increasingly dependent on their contributions to the economy and to government programs such as Medicare and Social Security. This suggests the necessity for continued investments in the nation's diverse young adults as the population continues to age" (Frey, 2018).

As the nation reflects a more diverse population – its activities, fields, and processes should also adapt to embrace this medley that contributes to the country's prosperity.

With the history of exclusion in a growing, diverse America serving as motivation for this work, this thesis is centered around how cultural connections within traditionally exclusive fields can influence engagement amongst marginalized groups. The thesis's approach touches on how physical artifacts of African American culture can help increase participation in activities which this community normally feels excluded from. The absence of embracing African American culture within mental health is only one of many examples of exclusion, yet it is the field of choice to conduct this research. Furthermore, this research contributes to discussions about how fields, such as mental health, can be more welcoming and inclusive to diverse groups of people. Beginning with one demographic group can provide insight into how this work may scale and be applied to other groups.

Chapter 2:
Mental Health in America

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that "only 41% of adults in the U.S with a mental health condition received mental health services in the past year" ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). Additionally, in the past year, 62.9% of adults with a serious mental illness received mental health services ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). Mental health was selected as the focus of this research to not only serve as an example of how cultural connections can impact an exclusionary field; but it was chosen because it is an issue that is in constant need of attention. This thesis is not considered to deliver a solution to mental health engagement. Instead, it aims to present an unconventional approach to the problem.
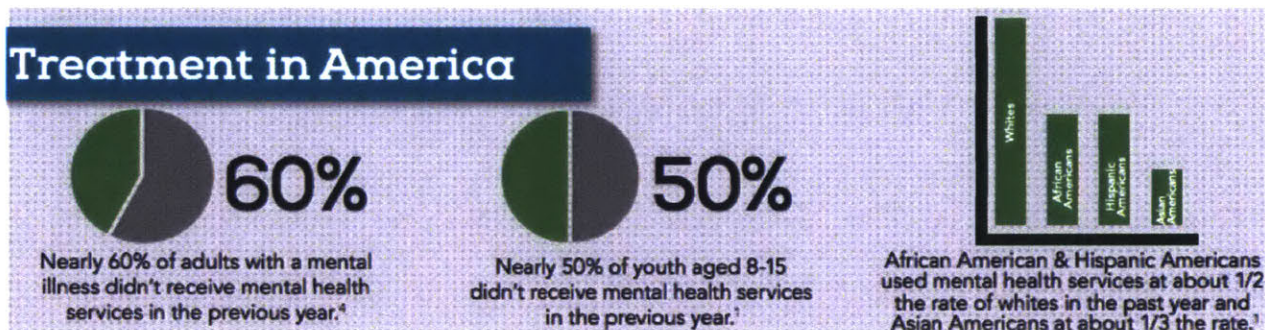
Figure 2-1. Percentage of Mental Health Treatment in America
("Mental Health Facts In America")

As described in the figure above, "African Americans and Hispanic Americans each use mental health services at about one-half the rate of Caucasian Americans and Asian Americans at about one-third the rate" ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). Specifically, in the African American community, mental health has been traditionally associated with stigmas or negative stereotypes. This has oftentimes resulted in the topic being undiscussed and left untreated amongst members of the community, even though African Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population ("African American Mental Health"). "Greater exposure and

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vulnerability to unfavorable social, economic, and environmental circumstances" (World Health Organization and Calouste Gulbenkian foundation, 2014, p. 9) has led to poor mental health and higher risk for mental illness within this group. Historical trails of trauma, including oppression and injustice, have been passed down from generation to generation without proper measures taking place to facilitate healing within the community. When faced with difficult struggles, it has been common for the African American community to turn toward religion and spirituality to combat mental health issues. Although religion holds a significant place within African American history and culture, many in the community are looked down upon if they seek assistance beyond religious counsel or a place of worship. As a result, mental health is often minimized within the community – making engagement with the topic extremely low.

Aside from the many systemic problems relating to mental health treatment, there are other barriers of entry that many multicultural groups often face when seeking treatment. Figure 2-2 indicates several of these barriers, including stigma and stereotypes. However, this research will primarily focus on the barrier of cultural insensitivity within the health care system – specifically mental health.

Higher levels of stigma	Less access to treatment	Less likely to receive treatment
Poorer transportation	**Barriers to mental health treatment**	Racism, bias, homophobia or discrimination in treatment settings
Language barriers	Lower rates of health insurance (or lack thereof)	*Culturally insensitive health care system
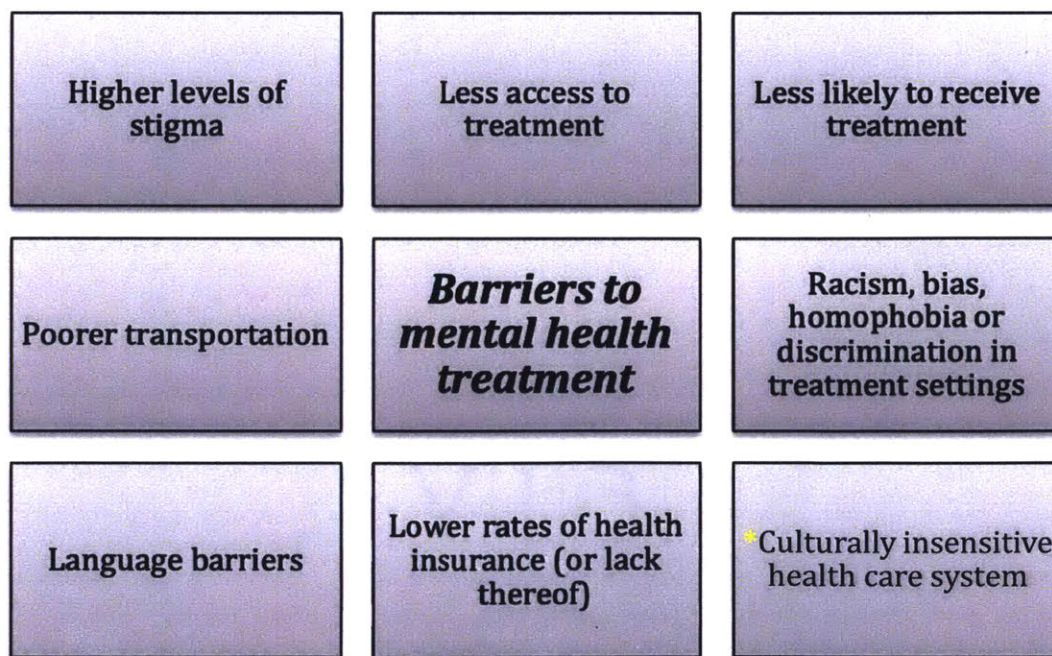
Figure 2-2. Examples of Barriers to Mental Health Treatment

("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care")

Cultural insensitivity in the health care system has resulted in many excluded groups, including African Americans, receiving poor quality care and even misdiagnosis. Recognizing that the U.S. mental health system fails to engage people who seek treatment, NAMI (the largest grassroots mental health organization in the nation) conducted a listening session in 2016 with participants including, yet not limited to, individuals with mental health conditions, family members, researchers/academics, and mental health therapists. To gain different perspectives on how to effectively engage people in mental health, the session facilitators posed the question:

"How can providers and health systems better serve people with mental health conditions who are not engaged in care?"

("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care", p. 4). From the conversations and experiences shared, two key takeaways that support this thesis are:

- Takeaway 1:

  "If we want to improve the lives of individuals with mental illness and their families, we must shift to a culture that embraces engagement as a new standard of care" ("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care", p. 4).

- Takeaway 2:

  "Engagement is multi-dimensional, so it must embrace the entirety of a person in the context of family, language, culture, and community" ("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care", p. 6).

I argue that multicultural groups, including African Americans, cannot be engaged with mental health in the exact same way as other groups due to a difference in cultural backgrounds and upbringings. "Greater cultural competence of mental health service providers is associated with better overall outcomes (access, participation, satisfaction, and service outcomes) for African American youth and their families (Mancoske, Lewis, Bower-Stevens, & Ford, 2012)" (National Association of School Psychologists). The

approach to engagement must be one that is genuine and authentic, values the culture, and conveys a sense of hope and motivation.

The participants also shared more insight into characteristics that contribute to these barriers to mental health treatment. Among these characteristics are:

1. "Inability or willingness to use creative and innovative approaches to engagement" ("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care", p. 14).
2. "Inability to work effectively within and across diverse cultures" ("Engagement: A New Standard for Mental Health Care", p. 14).

Outdated engagement practices need to be re-evaluated to provide new insight into how diverse methods of engagement can occur. This work leverages the characteristics above and keeps them at the center of its approach to address mental health engagement. I present the argument that a culturally relevant connection to mental health can increase engagement within the African American community. Can the perspective of sneakers aid in destigmatizing and contributing to the discussion of Black mental health? With this question, I explore the impact sneaker culture can have on generating new approaches to engagement. I propose that this culturally relevant connection has the potential to assist in dispelling the stigma and building a bridge to the societal issue.

Chapter 3:
Culture Matters

Defined as "the shared traditions, beliefs, customs, history, folklore, and institutions of a group of people" ("Understanding Culture and Diversity in Building Communities"), culture is not a fad or trend – but rather a way of life. Cultural groups share common experiences that, in turn, shape the way they understand the world ("Understanding Culture and Diversity in Building Communities"). Because the development of individuals occurs within different cultural contexts, there is no "one-size-fit-all" approach for how individuals and groups express themselves. When America was established, it's foundation was a culture of its own and it's still embedded within its structure today. Now that the nation is multicultural, I continuously express that it is essential for this foundation to adapt and include all cultures represented in the country today.

3.1 The Impact of Cultural Resonance and Relevance

Having a cultural connection can provide shelter from the "perceived stigmatization (a broad term that includes perceived misrecognition, prejudice, stereotyping, racism, discrimination, exclusion, etc.)" (Lamont, Welburn, & Fleming, 2016) that many multicultural groups experience. Research conducted at Harvard University on social resilience shares knowledge about what African Americans believe makes their culture so distinct. "In the context of interviews, a large number of individuals explained that African-Americans have a common culture and social experience, or a shared "background" that provides them a sense of pleasure" (Lamont, Welburn, & Fleming, 2016). This notion of a shared culture is mentioned frequently in the writing, along with other aspects of "cultural sameness" (Lamont, Welburn, & Fleming, 2016). The research conducted suggests that similar experiences and/or narratives can provide social support for groups traditionally excluded. "Psychologists have shown that shared identity provides a feeling of comfort, and of being understood that can act as buffers or provide solace when one feels being underestimated, distrusted, over-scrutinized, misunderstood, feared, overlooked, avoided, or discriminated against (e.g. Neblette et al 2004)" (Lamont, Welburn, & Fleming, 2016). Interviewees also emphasize the

importance of celebrating the many achievements of African Americans and cultivating knowledge of Black culture and tradition (Lamont, Welburn, & Fleming, 2016). With mental health being a highly exclusionary field, a shared culture can help bridge the gap or disconnect.

This thesis involves cultural relevancy because when presenting a low engaging topic such as mental health – it is important to empower people to know that they, along with their cultural background, are important and celebrated. However, it is also important to first be culturally competent – meaning to tie together knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity towards cultures to work effectively in cross-cultural settings ("Building Culturally Competent Organizations"). Additionally, it means validating who a person is and ensuring that a plethora of diversity is represented in various situations. It does not, however, equate to cultural appropriation – which is "the act of adopting elements of an outside, often minority culture, including knowledge, practices, and symbols, without understanding or respecting the original culture and context" ("Cultural Appropriation"). When engaging with groups to establish a cultural connection, respect for the cultures and experiences of others must be exuded, while also shining light on their inherent value. This knowledge helped to shape our research method, which is aimed to be as genuine and respectful as possible. By destroying barriers of mistrust, this respect will enable others to experience the appreciation of their culture from other cultural groups and generate feelings of compassion and belonging. Removing this barrier will help in addressing the primary issue of destigmatizing mental health in the African American community.

Chapter 4:
The Digital Era

It is undeniable that today's society is in a digital era. Technology, including digital tools and technologies, have opened the door to new engagement methods within various cultures and contexts. This section highlights the influence of digital technologies within African American culture.

"The affinity for personal connection and cultural interaction makes African Americans the most likely racial or ethnic group to get their news from social media. . ." ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 26). Furthermore, "Black Americans have adopted digital formats at a higher rate than the general population and have adapted the formats to provide a powerful platform to amplify their voices" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 13). While the weekly percentage of app or web use on a smartphone for total population is 79%, the percentage for African Americans is 81% ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 16). The time African Americans spend on smartphone apps and the internet exceeds the total population by three hours with a total usage time of over 19 hours ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 15) per week. Therefore, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and even LinkedIn have a higher reach among African American adults than the total U.S. adults ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 25).

WEEKLY REACH PERCENTAGE, 18+

	TOTAL POPULATION	AFRICAN AMERICAN
Total Use of Television	91%	92%
Live+Time-Shifted TV	88%	90%
Time-Shifted TV	52%	52%
Radio	92%	92%
App/Web on a Smartphone	79%	81%
Video-focused app/web on a smart phone	58%	66%
Streaming Audio	43%	45%
Social Networking	73%	75%

Figure 4-1. Weekly Percentage of Digital Usage for the Total Population Compared to
African Americans
("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of
Black Consumers", 2018, p. 16).

Additionally, this connection is bringing institutional change within society by using
mobile devices to expand digital technology, such as social media. Marketers are "often
finding these consumers' digital lives are the most effective point of engagement"
("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 3).
However, "African Americans are no longer content being thought of simply as
voracious consumers; they want to be known for the influence they've always
possessed, as the creators they've always been" ("From Consumers to Creators: The
Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 2). Recognizing the profound impact African
American culture has had on popular culture in America today, the African American
community is demanding to not only be heard, but involved. The community is also
demanding that organizations speak to them in ways that resonate "culturally and
experientially—if these brands want their business" ("From Consumers to Creators: The
Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 4). With an annual buying power of $1.3
trillion expected to increase to $1.54 trillion in 2022, organizations have no choice but to
listen to the demands of this community or a lot is at risk.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BUYING POWER
(TOP STATES $ BILLIONS)

NEW YORK $116B
$72B
$46B NEW JERSEY
CALIFORNIA
ILLINOIS $52B
MARYLAND
$93B
$54B VIRGINA
$60B
$90B
NORTH CAROLINA
TEXAS
GEORGIA
$117B
$90B FLORIDA
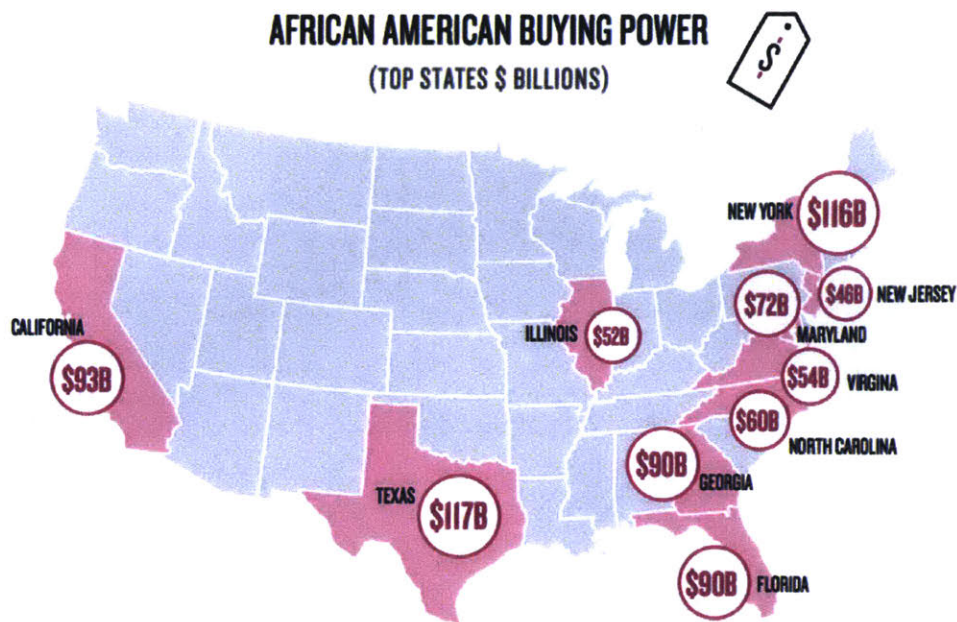
Figure 4-2. Top States with the Highest African American Buying Power
("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 10)

Black consumers have exhibited loyalty to brands that are authentic, culturally relevant, and actively involved with societal issues. In fact, 43% of African Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 (and 41% of those aged 35 or older) say they expect the brands they buy to support social causes – which is, respectively, 21% and 23% more than their non-Hispanic White counterparts ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", 2018, p. 7). It's undeniable that African Americans are impacting the cultural and economic status of America. This supports the argument that cultural relevance and competence matters when seeking to engage the African American community. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis that a cultural connection can influence the destigmatization of mental health is supported as well.

4.1 Colin Kaepernick and the Nike Ad Campaign

In September 2018, Nike released an online video celebrating the 30th Anniversary of its "Just Do It" ad campaign. The video titled "Dream Crazy" featured Colin Kaepernick, a former NFL Quarterback turned social activist, who has received public attention for

kneeling on football sidelines during the National Anthem at contests. As a protest against police brutality, oppression, and social injustice in America, his kneeling has generated a lot of controversy within an already divisive nation. The viral video, narrated by Kaepernick, was a push for viewers to dream big and impact the world. While this message was celebrated by many, it angered others.

Figure 4-3. Colin Kaepernick in Nike's "Just Do It" Ad Campaign (Today Show)

After the video was released, the public responded in multiple ways. Critics posted videos online of them burning and destroying Nike apparel, signifying their boycott of the company; and supporters expressed their approval both digitally and economically. According to Edison Trends ("Nike Online Sales Grew 31% Over Labor Day Weekend & Kaepernick Ad Campaign"), Nike online sales grew 31% over the Labor Day Weekend that the campaign was launched. The co-founder of Edison Trends expressed how "There was speculation that the Nike/Kaepernick campaign would lead to a drop in sales, but our data over the last week does not support that theory" (Linnane, 2018). Additionally, the $6 billion increase in value Nike gained during the month of September supercedes this speculation. It shows that Nike could show its consumer base that the company supports the issues that matter to them, especially when it is uncommon for

companies to become involved in political issues. Nike's decision to debut the campaign was an overall investment to its core customers, millennials and people of color.

"Among people ages 18 to 34, 44% supported Nike's decision to use Kaepernick, while 32% opposed it" (Meyersohn, 2018). This bracket marks two-thirds of the company's customers (Meyersohn, 2018). Furthermore, 68% of African Americans approved the ad campaign, while 16% did not (Meyersohn, 2018).With more than 80 million views on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube before the month's end, "the campaign yielded record engagement with the brand" according to Mark Parker, the chief executive of Nike (Creswell, Draper, & Maheshwari, 2018). "In less than 24 hours since Kaepernick first revealed the spot on Twitter, Nike received more than $43 million worth of media exposure, the vast majority of it neutral to positive, according to Apex Marketing Group" (Novy-Williams, 2018).

This is largely due to the company knowing and understanding its core consumer base, one that is diverse racially, culturally, and socially. A big influence in this consumer base comes from Nike's African American consumers. This consumer group is more likely to support social justice issues and this ad campaign made them feel heard. The campaign resonated with them "in a way that is authentic, culturally relevant, experiential and emotionally engaging" (Berr, 2018). Nike's approach with this campaign was about "cultivating an entire generation of consumers who are up for grabs at a moment where the lines between culture, politics and activism are blurry" (Wolken, 2018). This situation is an example of how important culture is to African Americans and its importance influences revenue. Though this thesis is not focused on commercialism, the results of the Nike ad campaign help prove that cultural relevance has the power to invoke change. Change is needed within the mental health field.

4.2 Black Twitter

Amongst the biggest supporters of the Nike ad campaign is a community known as "Black Twitter." Described by Nielsen as a natural evolution, "Black Twitter isn't merely a series of hashtags or a subgroup on Twitter; it is a platform for African Americans to mobilize Black culture and identity, to speak out against injustice, to cover issues

affecting their community, and to create social change" (Wolken, 2018). While the African American community has felt like their existence and voices have long been ignored, the grassroots force that is Black Twitter empowers them to speak out and communicate in a way that advocates for their community. It provides "ideas and concerns from a black perspective about social inequalities, politics and social justice, that were historically prohibited from taking root in other communication venues," explains Dr. Mia Moody-Ramirez (White, 2019). Additionally, Black Twitter has existed as a "digital safe space where Black people exchange ideas and opinions that are centered on the Black experience" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 27) – as described by Dr. Meredith Clark, Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia.

I present the topic of Black Twitter and its importance to explain how a cultural connection to activities and topics, whether in the commercial sector or within society, holds great importance in terms of including and engaging groups in new ways. It's the cultural connection existing within this community that celebrates the Black experience in a way America historically has not. "They are using social media to raise awareness of the situation of the Black community in American society" ("Young, Connected and Black: African-American Millennials are Driving Social Change and Leading Digital Advancement", p. 17). Community members are unifying the Black community while also strengthening the culture that makes them who they are.

The rise of Black Twitter has been so powerful and influential that research has begun to grow in this space. Its impact also extends beyond these arenas by influencing entertainment, comedy, and more. The community gathers online to discuss media content including television and award shows, movies, and popular news. Their hilarious commentary and memes uplift the community through laughter, while keeping everyone abreast on various topics. With approximately 40% of African Americans on Twitter comprising 28% of Twitter's 67 million users, the impact of the 9.3 million African Americans on Black Twitter is undeniable ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 26).

BLACKS ON TWITTER VS. BLACK TWITTER

19 MILLION
TOTAL AFRICAN
AMERICANS ON TWITTER

67 MILLION
TOTAL ACTIVE TWITTER
USERS NATIONWIDE

9.3 MILLION

**AFRICAN AMERICANS ON
#BLACKTWITTER**

TOTAL TWITTER USERS   AFRICAN AMERICAN TWITTER USERS   AFRICAN AMERICAN #BLACKTWITTER USERS
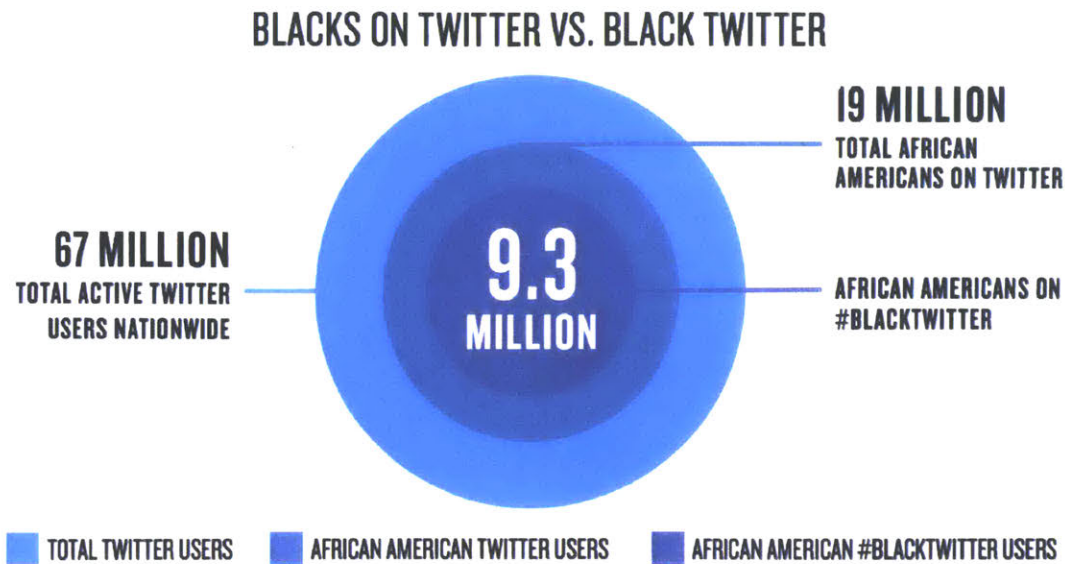
Figure 4-4. African American and #BlackTwitter Users
("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 26)

"Conversations on Black Twitter have led to advancements such as body cameras on police, heightened attention to the Flint water crisis, higher attendance at the 2017 Women's March, and the birth of the #metoo movement" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 28). The community has also given power to the hashtags #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, and so on. For example, the "#OscarsSoWhite movement, created by Twitter user @ReignofApril, led to a significant change in the makeup of the board of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and launched a debate about the industry's fidelity to representation and valuing of non-White contributions" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 28). Black Twitter "embraces critiques and praise for cultural representations and media agendas" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 27), which explains why the community expressed their support for Nike's campaign within the digital platform, through economic means, and beyond.

Chapter 5:
How Digital Tools Have Impacted Inclusionary Engagement

To provide more context on how digital technologies (primarily social media) has impacted exclusion in various fields, this section will provide examples and discuss how digital tools (with emphasis on a cultural connection) have impacted these fields by increasing engagement amongst marginalized communities – specifically the African American community. I have chosen to include this knowledge in order to introduce how the methods of this research aim to closely resemble the approach of these examples. The three fields presented include civic engagement, technology, and healthcare. This research does not aim to go in depth about each topic, but only to mention the evolution of exclusion that exists.

5.1 Civic Engagement

Division amongst race and class in American politics has been a longstanding topic throughout the course of its history. One common tactic known to attack the voting rights of many nationwide by creating significant burdens in exercising one's right to vote is voter suppression ("The Facts About Voter Suppression"). These burdens include, but are not limited to, eliminating same-day voter registration, restricting early voting, and requiring an ID to cast a voting ballot. "For example, a law adopted in Texas in 2014 was shown to have limited the accepted forms of voter ID in ways that disproportionately affected Black and Latino eligible voters relative to whites" ("The Facts About Voter Suppression"). Nearly 1 in 10 Americans do not have a government-issued photo ID and about 1 in 4 African-Americans do not possess a government-issued photo ID ("Fighting Voter Suppression"). Restricting the vote from eligible voters excludes them from participating in the democratic process to influence our nation's future ("The Facts About Voter Suppression"). This restriction, consequently, has affected specific groups the most – including people of color, the elderly, students and people with disabilities. Voter suppression, although it is the example chosen to provide context for this research, is not the only issue that is exclusionary within the field of politics. With more people, especially young and multicultural individuals, becoming

increasingly involved in politics – I'd argue that there should be new ways to make voting easier for eligible voters and new approaches to engage growing demographics as well.

The combination of social media and political participation is one that is constantly becoming stronger and impacting inclusivity within the field. As a result, digital technologies are helping to increase levels of engagement. With about 96% of Americans owning a cellphone in 2019 ("Demographics of Mobile Device Ownership and Adoption in the United States") – the Pew Research Center conducted a study examining online and offline political engagement, with an emphasis on the role the digital sphere (Smith, 2013). According to the study,

> "political engagement on social networking sites is especially commonplace among the youngest Americans, as two-thirds (67%) of all 18-24 year olds (and nearly three quarters of those young adults who use social networking sites) engaged in some sort of social network-related political activity in the 12 months preceding our survey" (Smith, 2013, p. 5).

Although adults and the elderly are also politically active digitally and tend to engage in politics in more offline ways, young American adults are most likely to engage in political behaviors on social networking sites than any other medium (Smith, 2013). Political candidates are taking note and utilizing the medium to rally supporters locally and even nationwide. Former Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum is an example of a political candidate who used the power of social media to excite his fan-base and gain a historic win during the Democratic 2018 primary for governor. "The 39-year old is the first African American to win either major party's nomination for statewide office in Florida, and the third top-of-ticket Black candidate in the United States to be nominated [in 2018] (along with Maryland's Ben Jealous and Georgia's Stacey Abrams)" ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 29). Though his campaign was outspent by his opponents by tens of millions of dollars, Gillum's grassroots approach to campaigning resulted in 1.1 million mentions of @AndrewGillum; and "Between June 1, 2018 and September 4, 2018 there were over 130,000 mentions of #bringithome,

#gillumforgovernor and #gillum4governor. . . ," ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 29). Former Boston City Councilwoman (now U.S. Representative), Ayanna Pressley, utilized social media for her Massachusetts campaign ("From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers", p. 29) as well. With the #ChangeCantWait hashtag, Pressley defeated her opponent by turning a 13-point deficit at the polls before election day into a 17-point win. The enthusiasm and cultural connection exemplified by these two campaigns contributed to the steady increase of voter turnout amongst African Americans, with the highest rates of voter registration and turnout in 2012 being the most out of any racial or minority group in the U.S.

5.1.1. Rock the Vote

A nonpartisan nonprofit named "Rock the Vote" is an organization who is also seeking to politically empower young people and people of color with less traditional engagement tactics. For nearly 30 years, this organization has focused primarily on the population(s) of the nation who experience less engagement in politics. "With a generation that is 44% people of color who have unique and disproportionate barriers to civic engagement, Rock the Vote has made outreach and empowerment of a diverse generation a top priority of its work" (Rock The Vote, 2016, p. 9). The nonprofit was originally founded by music executives, but has since partnered with over 40 youth brands, 60 women's media brands, and numerous influencers.

Rock the Vote utilizes digital tools and social media to drive the work they do. In their 2016 Annual Report (Rock The Vote, 2016, p. 5), their approach resulted in:
- over 1.7 million voter registration applications being processed through their free online voter registration tool;
- 9.8 billion media impressions from various media sources including Buzzfeed, the New York Times, and Teen Vogue;
- garnering 5.2 million views on their #WhyIVote videos on VEVO, which featured celebrities including rappers T.I. and Common, as well as singer John Legend.
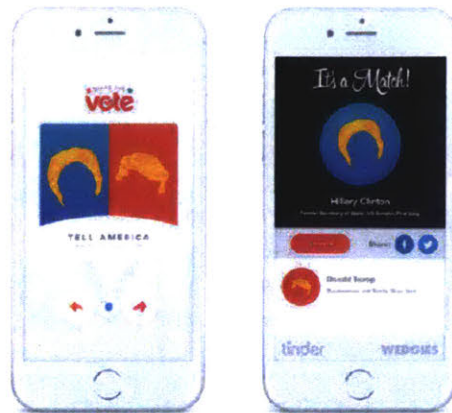
Figure 4-5. Tinder "Swipe the Vote" quiz
(Rock The Vote, 2016, p. 20)

By emphasizing the importance of the youth vote and understanding the growing diversity of our nation, Rock the Vote tapped into other areas of technology to make an impact. The development of the Election FM geo-fencing technology allowed individuals who were within 300 feet of a polling station to unlock exclusive music content. Their partnership with Tinder resulted in a "Swipe the Vote" quiz that matched individuals with the presidential candidate best aligned with their views. Displayed in the figure above, it amassed over 100,000 users in just one day (Rock The Vote, 2016, p. 20). By understanding their target audience, Rock the Vote's intentional and out-of-the-box tactics have proven to help excite a population of voters in being involved in our nation's political process. The uniqueness of this organization stems from their goals of engaging a demographic that has traditionally been known for being tough to engage for elections. In the 2016 Presidential Election, there was an 81% voter turnout rate amongst Rock the Vote youth registrants – with 58% being first time voters (Rock The Vote, 2016, p. 4). The organization "has revolutionized the way we use pop culture, music, art and technology to engage young people in politics and build collective power" (Rock the Vote) through a cultural connection.

5.1.2. Technology

Due to the lack of diversity that has existed for decades and still remains today, the technology field is the second example presented to highlight how digital technologies have influenced inclusion by incorporating a cultural connection. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), "the high tech sector has become a major source of economic growth fueling the U.S. economy," (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, p.1). Furthermore,

> "Employment in computer science and engineering is growing at twice the rate of the national average. These jobs tend to provide higher pay and better benefits, and they have been more resilient to economic downturns than other private sector industries over the past decade. In addition, jobs in the high tech industry have a strong potential for growth. These jobs are important to companies in all industries that require workers with technology skills. Employment trends in the high tech sector are therefore important to the national economic and employment outlook," (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, p.1-2).

With the high level of opportunity in the technology field, there are many groups that are not provided with an equal playing field. The Rainbow PUSH Coalition is one of the organizations aiming to change this by committing "to protect, defend, and gain civil rights by leveling the economic and educational playing fields, and to promote peace and justice around the world" (Rainbow Push Coalition). Founded by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. (Civil Rights Activist and former Presidential Candidate), the organization has challenged technology giants to reveal the demographics of their workforce for more than 15 years; but it wasn't until 2014 when they agreed to do so. The data revealed that the demographics of some of the nation's major technology companies did not reflect the diverse consumer base they often have. In 2014, 47% of employees were White, 41% were Asian American, 6% were Hispanic, and only 3% of employees were Black within the top ranked 75 Silicon Valley tech firms, as shown in the following table.

Total Employed	209,089	100%
Women	62,960	30%
Men	146,129	70%
Asian American	86,340	41%
Black	5,720	3.%
Hispanic	12,824	6.%
White	99,222	47%

N=230 establishments

Table 4.1. 2014 EEO-1 Data For Top Ranked 75 Silicon
Valley Tech Firms Aggregated
(U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, p.29).

Inclusion drives innovation and unleashes compelling ideas, which all can contribute to the greater society. Strides are being made to emphasize its importance within the technology field. For instance, "Blavity is a tech company for forward thinking Black millennials pushing the boundaries of culture and the status quo," (Blavity) and it strongly leverages cultural connections in combination with digital technologies to impact the technology sector. With seven million readers per month, "Blavity is disrupting existing media companies by thinking about digital culture first, and there's no doubt this accelerated our growth," shared CEO Morgan DeBaun (Logan, 2018). The existence of culture, specifically African American culture, provides a connection to the platform's audience that fills a void which many other companies, organizations, and activities within technology do not possess. The company has since expanded into other realms celebrating the connection between culture and technology. An example is AfroTech, which is one of their premier events. Each year, thousands of tech engineers, entrepreneurs, and students gather in the Bay Area, California to engage in panel discussions, workshops, recruiting sessions, and making new connections at the conference. The African American community has been longing for this cultural connection within technology, and AfroTech has been helping to fulfill this gap.

5.1.3. Healthcare

The final example in this section is the field at the center of this research: healthcare. The exclusion within healthcare has occurred for centuries, yet it remains unaddressed today. "Differences in populations characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, culture, and gender are at the root of many of the present health and health system problems in the United States" ("Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare: A Background and History", 2003, p. 456). These problems reflect the "outcomes that reflect medical-social values and policies in Western (and later U.S.) medicine and healthcare, which paralleled the values and policies in the larger societies" ("Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare: A Background and History", 2003, p. 456). For a growingly diverse population, health inequity should be a concern for the nation ("Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare: A Background and History", 2003, p. 456) . Exclusion within the health field, which affects many populations, not only has an impact on our global economy – but the nation's economy as well.

Declared by the United Nations as a "prerequisite for personal and societal development" (Ribeiro and Khamis, 2016, p. 4), healthcare is essential to helping one achieve optimal health and reach their fullest potential; yet its inequities limit the ability of many populations to do so ("Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare: A Background and History", 2003, p. 456). Though the trace of inequity in health holds great depth and complexity, "solutions for health equity need to take into account the social, political, and historical context of race and ethnicity in this country" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. . ., 2017). Defined as systematic differences in the health status of different population groups, health inequities are linked to various social factors including education, employment and income levels, and quality of one's neighborhood (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. . ., 2017). An example of a health inequity would be infant mortality rates:

> ". . . differences in infant mortality rates among racial/ethnic groups in the United States are partially attributable to preventable differences in education and access to health and prenatal care (15)" (Arcaya, Arcaya, Subramanian, 2015).

Evidence proves that examples, such as this, can be avoided and are perceived to be unjust. With healthcare deemed to be a human right, health equity should be recognized as a priority and the need for more inclusivity cannot be denied.

Utilizing digital tools and social media may seem like an odd combination; however, it has proven to be successful for some. Dr. Jessica Clemons, MD (also known as Dr. Jess) is a New York City-based psychiatrist who is utilizing social media to change the perception around mental health. With more than 60,000 followers on Instagram (IG), she connects with her audience during her Q/A's Live on IG each Saturday and Sunday. Her platform seeks to "create a safe digital space for Black people to learn, grow, and #BeWell" (Dirshe, 2018). The historical lack of access to health resources has made it difficult for African Americans to properly take account for their health and wellbeing. Through the free platform of Instagram, Dr. Jess aims to empower marginalized communities to seek mental treatment and actively engage with life. She has also expanded her platform with the #BeWell series, where she hosts live conversations with individuals in entertainment about how mental health plays a role in their lives. In November 2018, she also hosted the first live therapy session televised on VH1 titled "In Session: Live With Dr. Jess" – interviewing radio host, television personality, author, and mental health advocate, Charlamagne Tha God. Though Dr. Jess and many others are making strides in normalizing mental health and dispelling the stigma within the Black community, there is still much work to do. This research aims to expand upon this impactful work by exploring an innovative approach to destigmatizing mental health conversations through sneakers.

Chapter 6:
Sneaker Culture

Sneakers are a cultural phenomenon whose rise in prominence dates back to the 1970s in Bronx, New York. It was around this same time that hip-hop was born, which explains its deep association to the genre. Sneaker culture was chosen as the culture of focus for this research due to its power to instill confidence in individuals while also evoking change around the world. Its significance is oftentimes diminished, but those who have experienced its development know how influential sneakers are. Sneakers also appear to not have been linked to the topic of mental health, which increases the appeal in demonstrating the ability to converge two opposite topics.

"When looking back across the long history of the sneaker, it is clear that the sneaker's extraordinary relevance today remains tied to the cultural impulses that have motivated and nurtured sneaker culture for the last two hundred years" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 197). During the Industrial Age, sneakers were created as a "diversion in physical recreation and eagerly consumed athletic footwear" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 19). Over time, the impact of sneakers shifted from contributing towards the dominance and physical fitness of the wealthy to paving the way for the "creation of highly commodifiable superstar athletes whose sneakers would become objects of desire in the following decades" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 19). The sport of basketball ignited a cultural shift that began with the athletes, but fans quickly adopted it and made it their own. "Any iconic hip-hop sneaker, from Chucks to Shell Toes to Air Force 1s, was first made cool by ballplayers outdoors, without exception" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 15). For example, NBA Hall of Famer, Walt "Clyde" Frazier, signed a deal with Puma and collaborated with the company to manufacture a shoe. Frazier believes "because basketball players are so popular and basketball is an iconic sport, shoes are a way for players to show off their creativity and assert their personal style" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 95).

Figure 4-6. The Puma Clyde Sneakers (Puma History)

By athletes taking action to disrupt the norms of expression in basketball, this inspired young people in urban communities to expand these sneakers beyond the basketball court by adding their own unique style as streetwear. It was during this time when sneakers became more than an athletic shoe; they were deemed cultural icons for even the non-athlete.

"Within our hip-hop culture, a fresh pair of sneakers made a powerful statement" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 137), shared Darryl "DMC" McDaniels of the legendary rap group Run DMC. "It was a way of saying, "I am somebody! I am kool, I am all that and then some, and the world had better take notice!" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 137). Sneaker culture provided young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds the ability to creatively express themselves and celebrate their identity in a world that constantly puts them down. Sneakers became viewed as "a means of establishing nuanced individuality" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 21). Bobbito Garcia, former Editor-in-Chief of Bounce magazine, shared how creatively designing his sneakers, even back in the 80s, not only showed his uniqueness but it created a social bridge where conversations were sparked with sneakers as the starting point (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 15). From sneaker conventions to exclusive

shoe releases, the culture consists of individuals who share common cultural connection through sneakers.

"Sneakers are worn by millions worldwide and seem to transcend gender, age, and socioeconomic condition" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 19). The culture has expanded across racial, national, and even economic boundaries. What began in the 1970s in New York has grown on an international scale and is valued as a 26-billion-dollar market. However, this research does not focus on its market value; but it instead highlights their existence as agents of change. For example, at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, American Olympic gold medalist Tommie Smith and his bronze medal-winning teammate John Carlos stood on the podiums with their heads lowered and black leather-gloved fists raised at the playing of the "Star-Spangled Banner" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 79). "It was the height of the civil rights movement, and the athletes used their moment of fame to highlight the hypocrisy of an America that valorized their achievements yet maintained a racist society, as well as to symbolize the poverty endured by people around the world" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 79). The Puma Suede shoes, embellished with the brand's signature panther, that the athletes took off during the act were emblazoned in the memories of all who watched – despite the harsh criticism and expulsion these athletes faced (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 79).
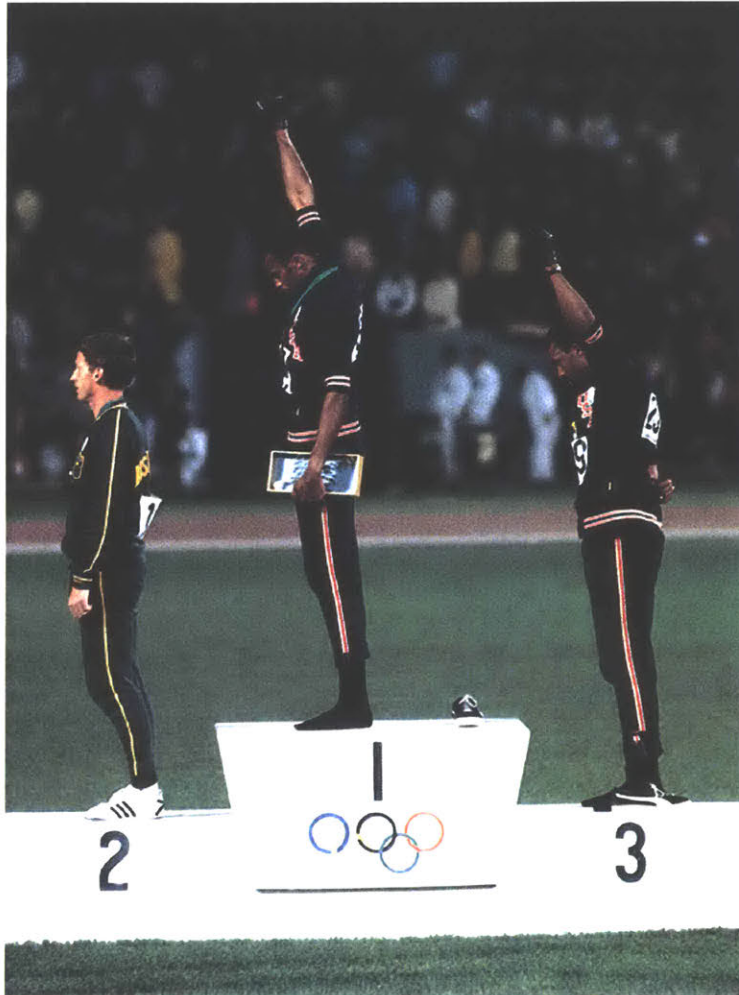
Figure 4-7: Tommie Smith and teammate John Carlos at the
1968 Mexico City Olympics (Layden, 2018)

Leveraged as a platform for social good, sneakers have also been used to increase awareness of Breast Cancer and campaign for other notable charities. As producer of the television series, "It's The Shoes", Bobbito Garcia used his platform to promote Hoops 4 Hope: a non-profit organization based in South Africa and Zimbabwe. They use "sneaker donations from the U.S. as a way to draw youth to their basketball clinics, where they teach life skills and HIV prevention," (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 16). Athletes, such as LeBron James and Stephen Curry, have sent messages of hope and support by wearing shoes during contests with the words "Equality" and "MBK" (My Brother's Keeper) on them, respectively.

"The new nexus between individuals and brands is expanding the vocabulary of style and allowing increasing voices to be heard. These wide-ranging interests in sneakers have also created new avenues for engagement, from gender politics to social change" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 197).

I argue that mental health can be an avenue for engagement – which is the inspiration behind connecting sneakers to mental health. Throughout its long history, the changes in sneaker culture "are intertwined with compelling stories that reflect fascinating consistencies and profound changes from the relentless pursuit of the new and innovative to the constantly shifting politics of inclusion and exclusion" (Semmelhack, Garcia, Lepri, Willis, & Hatfield, 2015, p. 19). With mental health being an unpopular topic amongst African Americans, I present in this thesis how sneakers and sneaker culture can provide alternate perspectives and approaches towards engagement with mental health in the African American community.

Chapter 7:

Design

This section discusses this thesis's approach to evaluating the proposed hypothesis: The cultural significance of sneakers can help destigmatize and increase mental health engagement within the African American community. Through ethnographic research and a design workshop, data was gathered to guide the method of evaluation. The IDEO Method Cards and community interviews were also included as a significant part of this research. The design of the approach provided insight into possible opportunities to combine sneakers and mental health, in an effort to evaluate the hypothesis. It also aimed to emphasize the value of community participation to brainstorm potential solutions.

7.1 Ethnographic Research

To evaluate the hypothesis, we began by gathering information relating to our target audience and exploring community interaction. As a research project motivated by inclusivity, it is essential that the community we seek to engage is indeed a part of the process. Therefore, our approach was carefully organized to be as authentic as possible. It began with observing interactions amongst community members in a common environment and engaging in conversations with them. With the information collected during this stage, we then collaborated with members and allies of the sneaker community in a workshop designed to receive feedback and ideas about how to move forward towards a solution.

7.2 People-Centered Design

Engaging with mental health through sneakers is not a common approach. Due to it being a developing idea, it's important to maintain people as its focus. To do so, I decided to use the IDEO Method Cards (IDEO) as a tool to aid in finding an answer to a tough problem. Divided into four categories – Learn, Look, Ask, and Try – the 51 cards each provide a different method along with an example of when to use it. For this work,

we utilized the following methods: "Fly on the Wall", "Surveys & Questionnaires", and "Unfocus Group".

"Fly on the Wall" is a method to "observe and record behavior within its context, without interfering with people's activities" (IDEO). The context in which we chose to conduct these observations was in a space where lots of sneaker enthusiasts gather – a sneaker convention. Referring to themselves as "New England's Greatest Sneaker Convention," Boston Got Sole (or BGS) was the sneaker convention I attended in February 2019 (Boston Got Sole). Sneaker conventions are very popular in the sneaker community, as a place to connect with other sneaker lovers and gain access to exclusive shoes. There were thousands of people in attendance for the 6-hour BGS event held at Gillette Stadium. There were vendor tables, full of shoes and price tags, that were aligned in rows throughout the venue. Navigating the large crowd at the event was also a challenge, as many had to squeeze between people and wait for enough space to approach vendor tables. Multiple shoes of the same kind, along with multiple sizes, filled tables throughout the venue. The event had an atmosphere that was extremely cultural – with performances by local artists, a disc jockey engaging the crowd, and exclusive BGS apparel being sold. However, it also had an aura that was extremely entrepreneurial. Attendees arrived to the event with bags full of shoe boxes ready to sell and negotiate trades. At each table, there were at least two to three people either interacting with customers or being attentive to make sure all merchandise remained present. While recognizing these observations, it also appeared as though conversation between vendor and consumer was limited to discussion primarily about the sneaker(s). Many interactions and discussions involved negotiations of prices, the availability of sizes, and condition of the shoe(s). However, with panels titled "Creativity in Sneakers and Fashion" and "Turning Passion into Profit", the attendees and I were able to hear the advice of several individuals – including boutique owners, clothing designers, and innovators – who have long been members of the sneaker community.

The panels held at the sneaker convention gave a deeper outlook about the thriving community that is often overlooked in sneaker culture. Individuals on the panel spoke

openly about the evolution of sneaker culture since the time they each were introduced to it. One panelist shared how sneakers have always been an avenue to express yourself in various ways, but now a lot of people are following trends. Others chimed in with agreement – adding how social media fame/influence, making money, and looking *cool* have caused many people to jump into streetwear and fashion. However, one common theme that emerged from the panelists is community. Although the culture has shifted to be more trendy, it's the passion of the community that keeps it going. "It's the community that makes it great," one panelist said about sneaker culture. He then continued by sharing how, at the age of 13, he felt a sense of belonging at the sneaker store near where he grew up. Inclusion is important to him and it impacted his career as the owner of a sneaker boutique, where he also aims to cultivate a culture of inclusivity and belonging for the youth who come to his shop. This supports the sentiments of a different panelist who shared that when people benefit and give back to the culture, there's also a benefit they receive. The themes of popularity and people (or community) may seem somewhat opposite, but they both hold a place within sneaker culture and contribute to the interactions occurring today. One thing that is mutual amongst those who relate to one or both of the themes is the value of the sneaker. According to the panel, the meaning and story behind each shoe is what keeps their passion flowing.

7.3 Interviews

The findings I gained while observing the environment, behaviors, and conversation amongst people at the event each influenced my goal of understanding more about the problem area, while also influencing the interactions I proceeded to have. Through interviews, I aimed to receive insight into the perspectives of community members regarding how sneakers can have an impact on community engagement, specifically with mental health.

The "Strategies for Qualitative Interviews" resource ("Strategies for Qualitative Interviews), provided by the Harvard University Department of Sociology, served as a useful guide to investigate the research question posed. Due to the event being highly ambitious, the flow of the interview was extremely important. Therefore, I approached

individuals empathetically and with a warm up question that would help build rapport – allowing them the opportunity to share with me their own story as a member of the sneaker community. Respectful of the amount of time I may have with each individual before they had to attend to a potential customer, I drafted a list of short and simple questions to help guide the conversation. However, I allowed the respondent to steer the conversation to ensure it was authentic, considerate, and I was attentive. Below is the list of questions prepared prior to interacting with attendees:

1. What's your favorite shoe of all time?
2. What motivated you to attend this event?
3. How did you become interested in the sneakers?
4. For how long have you been a part of the sneaker community?
5. What inspires you to remain involved within the community?
6. How might sneaker culture influence social issues?
7. How might sneaker culture provide a connection to mental health engagement?
8. What's the best thing about being a part of the sneaker community?
9. Describe your most memorable experience since you've been involved with sneaker culture?
10. What advice would you give to those who are starting to become interested in sneakers and sneaker culture?

During the event, I conducted interviews with 10 individuals – including event vendors, attendees, and panelists. Amongst these individuals were sneaker boutique owners, music artists, sneaker vendors, and other participants who are fascinated by sneaker culture. The event largely catered to the male population, with primarily men sized sneakers and clothing at the event. Unfortunately, this caused an uneven balance in our interview data – with 80% of respondents identifying as male and 20% as female. However, the data gathered from the responses unveiled some new ideas and strategies that could be utilized moving forward. Therefore, the takeaways from these interviews, in addition to the findings from the observations, have been organized into three themes: passion, popularity, and people.

7.3.1. Passion

"You're led by your passion, no matter if the road changes," were the words shared by a respondent during our conversation. While speaking to several community members, I found that passion was the key that unlocked their commitment to contributing to this thriving community. Not only is sneaker culture a form of expression, as shared by one of the panelists, but it elevates individuals to a level of self-confidence that allows them to be themselves. This, in turn, empowers them to live freely in ways which include making a living through self-employment. One respondent expressed to me how they would rather be self-employed than to work for others, which is why their sneaker boutique has been thriving for 15 years. Though the money is great and people can create a career from their passion, sneakers still hold sentimental value to them. "There are a few pair [of sneakers] I would never sell," expressed a respondent. Over 60% of the respondents shared the same sentiments.

7.3.2. Popularity

The theme, popularity, also classifies the information gathered through the interviews. Adding to comments made by a panelist about the growing trendiness of sneaker culture, a respondent shared how it's difficult seeing people get involved with sneakers for its popularity when others are truly passionate about it. They continued by sharing how it's not difficult, however, to discern these types of people. On the other hand, some respondents believed it's the preference of the individual: "Some people are in it for the fashion, but some are here for the community and culture." I also found that some people seek to leverage fashion and sneakers to build their personal or business brand. For example, a local music artist attended the event to provide attendees with apparel to match with their sneakers. The apparel, including free t-shirts, had information on how to access his music. He explained how he has seen how the sneaker industry can be a lucrative business, so he wanted to conduct a test on how much revenue and/or exposure he could generate at this event. Despite whether one is "in it for the fashion" or "here for the community and culture," it's the people that enable sneaker culture to thrive.

7.3.3. People

The most common theme within my ethnographic research thus far is people, or the community. When asking individuals – "How do you remain committed and active within this community?" – many replied, "It's the people." With the younger generation bringing new trends and innovation to this culture and the older, more established generation experiencing its evolution – there exists a tradition of giving back or connecting to one another. "Everyone can connect through sneakers," expressed one respondent. The individual continued by saying that that's what makes the culture and community so unique. I discovered that, in several of my conversations, many believed that there's a benefit in giving back to the culture and community that has benefitted them. Similarly, the act of giving back holds high significance in the African American community – whether it's through mentoring, leadership, or local events. The local music artist selling apparel at the event shared how he wants to begin organizing back-to-school drives from his sales revenue. It's also one of the reasons why he hands out free shirts instead of charging a fee – which is to give back to those who has given to him and is following in his footsteps. Many of the individuals I had the pleasure of speaking with believe that the interactions held with one another has a profound impact – similar to the experience of the panelist who felt a sense of belonging as a child in his local sneaker boutique. He added how "nothing can really replace the one-on-one interaction" with the consumer and other sneaker enthusiasts. It's the people who keep the passion strong, determine what's popular, and create a sense of belonging within the sneaker community.

7.4 Design Challenge Statement

To guide the approach to its next step, I constructed a subset of "How might we" (also known as HMW) statements, or short questions to assist with the brainstorming process. "HMWs are seeds for your ideation that fall out of your point-of-view statement, design principles, or insights" ("Method "How Might We" Questions"). The insights from the ethnographic research divided into three main themes were leveraged to construct these statements. The HMW statements that were created to brainstorm how to destigmatize conversations about mental health in the African American community are:

- How might we enable people to express their confidence (as they do with sneakers) in relation to mental health?

- How might we provide a one-on-one interaction with mental health, similar to interactions held within sneaker culture?

- How might we leverage the popularity of sneakers to enlighten the community about mental health?

- How might we empower individuals to view themselves as champions over mental health issues, just as they feel in control of how they wear their sneakers?

- How might we build a bridge between the younger and older generations to generate a sense of belonging or acceptance with mental health that many find in sneaker boutiques?

Reflecting on these HMW statements led to the design statement of: "How might we empower individuals to share their narrative about mental health through the less evoking perspective of sneakers?" This design statement led to the construction of a footwear and design workshop for sneaker enthusiasts and mental health advocates – as well as allies of both.

7.5 Design Workshop

"How might we empower individuals to share their narrative about mental health through the less evoking perspective of sneakers?" is the design statement that influenced the continuation of this work. Expanding on this statement, I also sought to explore how footwear can build a connection to exclusionary topics (such as mental health)? To explore this and honor May as Mental Health Awareness month, a design workshop was held to move this thesis research forward. Titled "Footwear x Wellness: A Workshop Exploring How Footwear May Influence Perspectives About Mental Health", the workshop had nearly 15 individuals to participate. As a pilot, the workshop was held at MIT with students across different departments including the Sloan School of Business, Media Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Political Science, and the Integrated

Design and Management program. Though these individuals were current students, they were also sneaker enthusiasts, designers, footwear entrepreneurs, and sneaker admirers. The purpose of the workshop was to solicit ideas from participants that would examine how sneaker culture can be leveraged to help dispel the stigma surrounding mental health. It was to explore a different approach to how mental health is viewed and present it to those experiencing a lack of connection to the issue. The workshop aimed to allow participants to feel in control of their sneakers and convey their mental health experiences.

7.6 Process

The goals of the design workshop included leading participants through a process to convey their emotions or experiences with mental health through their sneaker design(s). Participants could even communicate the story of a loved one through their design. We began the workshop by touching on the topic of mental health, especially the stigma existing within the Black community, and how important it is to find innovative ways to address the issue. The co-leader of the workshop and I continued by expressing how we would like to explore how sneaker culture can influence this.

To introduce participants to the design process of the workshop, we showed them a video titled "How to be a Sneaker Designer for Nike and Jordan." The video by Complex (a media platform reporting on trends including fashion, music, sports, and sneaker culture) described the design process we wanted to emulate. After this glimpse into the structure of the workshop, we asked participants to think of a story that'd like to tell. We provided a few examples of shoes that convey a particular meaning or tell a specific story through its design. We then encouraged everyone to think of one of their own experiences relating to mental health. They researched potential sources of inspiration for their shoe design and thoughtfully considered how their inspiration related to mental health within their life, or the life of a loved one. With a choice of at least 2 images, 3 colors, or 1 emotion, each participant had the foundation for what would be conveyed through the design of their own sneaker.

Once all participants identified the inspirational source of their design, they each paired with another participant to share what they wanted to convey about mental health. As mentioned previously, one of the HMW statements that derived from the ethnographic research was, "How might we provide a one-on-one interaction with mental health, similar to interactions held within sneaker culture?" By pairing up with other participants, we wanted to foster a space for one-on-one interaction to occur within the workshop. We encouraged each partner to predict what inspiration their partner was attempting to share. Depending on if their prediction was right or wrong, participants were encouraged to use the constructive feedback to continue iterating.

After receiving feedback from their peers, participants began to transform their vision into a design with sneaker design tools and resources. They were given the freedom to select a model shoe and use the images, colors, or emotions they chose as their inspiration to begin designing their shoe. Participants were given creative control over their design – meaning they could select the brand, software, and resources they individually preferred. Even though we provided a list of online resources they could use, due to time constraints, they were free to hand draw the design if they desired. With most customization platforms, there are existing constraints so we did not want them to be limited in their creativity. The task for participants was to seek resources that could guide their vision and bring their inspiration to life.

The workshop continued by encouraging participants to share their finished product with a new partner. By solely focusing on the design, they each attempted to guess the inspiration behind the shoe. At the conclusion of the 1.5 hour workshop, participants shared their designs, along with 1-2 sentences about how they each connect to the topic of mental health. During the final discussion of the workshop, a few individuals shared their designs with us:

- Conveying the emotion of being misunderstood or conflicted, one participant selected the New Balance 997 shoe to share how everyone has reached a point where they have been unsure about how to navigate feeling two things at once; and that we never know what someone is dealing with below the world's surface.

- Inspired by tranquility and taking breaks to clear their mind, another participant designed a shoe with images of nature guiding their vision. They, too, chose the New Balance 997 sneaker.

Figure 4-8: Footwear Design Workshop - Tranquility Sneaker

- Triumph, or achievement, represented the images that inspired the Nike Air Force 1 Mid shoe designed by a participant.

Figure 4-9: Footwear Design Workshop – Sneaker of Triumph

- Using the colors blue, orange, and white to convey a calm and relaxing emotion on a Nike sneaker was the vision of one participant. This shoe was dedicated to loved ones who have bipolar depression disorder and different forms of schizophrenia. It symbolized that even when they're in a calm state, there are things to be cautious about including taking proper medication, care, and awareness.

The images and descriptions of these designs provided insight into how individuals would discuss mental health through the lens of a sneaker. The feedback from the participants also helped guide the next phases of this research.

Findings

Following the workshop, we asked each participant to complete a brief survey. Each respondent could omit any question they did not prefer to answer. Below is a list of the questions asked:

1. What was your motivation in attending today's workshop? Select all that apply:

    Footwear ___ Design ___ Mental Health ___

2. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being least comfortable, 10 being most comfortable), please indicate how comfortable you are with discussing topics pertaining to mental health?

3. Do you believe mental health and wellness is a topic inclusive to all people? Please explain.

4. How do you think footwear can build a connection to exclusionary topics, such as mental health and wellness? (1 – strongly disagree to 10 – strongly agree)

5. On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate the importance of cultural relevance when discussing mental health and wellness.

6. How might we help destigmatize discussions about mental health?

From this survey, there were several key findings to highlight:

- Zero participants indicated mental health and wellness as their only motivator for participating.

- Nearly 67% of respondents believe that mental health and wellness is not a topic inclusive to all people, while 22% believe it is. The remaining percentage represented neutral responses.

- About 89% of respondents rated 8 or higher for footwear being able to build a connection to exclusionary topics, such as mental health and wellness. Additionally, with ratings no lower than 9, the majority of participants strongly agree that cultural relevance is important when discussing mental health and wellness.

We found that interests (outside of mental health and wellness) of many of the participants served as motivators to attend the workshop. This helps to convey the idea that in order to engage those who are not primarily interested in mental health, there may be a common interest or connection that helps to build a bridge between the two. Furthermore, the participants shared barriers to inclusivity that they believe currently exist which include:

- the manifestation of stigmas associated with mental health;
- current conversations and discussions about mental health being gendered and racialized;
- certain ethnicities and males having stigmas related to the belief that they must always be strong and unaffected by mental health issues;
- reflecting on mental health being a privilege;
- and therapy is expensive.

Another response shared how mental health is inclusive because it can affect anyone, but exclusive because some people are in a better position to prioritize their mental health more than others.

Responses given for the final question of "How might we help destigmatize discussions about mental health?" were useful in helping to determine the next step of this research. Amongst the responses were:

- To use new mediums, such as the workshop, to allow people to express themselves.
- Normalizing mental health discussions, although it is difficult to do, is extremely important.

- Being committed to having culturally-relevant conversations about the topic (or anything related to having a shared identity) to gain a sense of solidarity rather than vulnerability will empower people to be more transparent about the issues they face.
- Make the topic as open and inclusive as possible.
- Continue to speak about it and encourage others to join so that the audience will be broader.
- Connect the topic to things people are much more comfortable with, such as shoes, especially in urban settings where PTSD and the interest in sneakers are both at a high level.

During the duration of this thesis project, we focused on the following statements which we believed would be most feasible in the time allotted for this research:

1. Be committed to having culturally-relevant conversations about the topic to gain a sense of solidarity rather than vulnerability to empower people to be open about the issues they face.
2. Continue to speak about it and encourage others to join so that the audience will be broader.
3. Connect the topic to things people are more comfortable with – like shoes.

Leveraging the feedback received from our design workshop helped us to move forward in the next phase of this work known as the "Footwear x Mental Health Campaign."

Chapter 8:

Evaluation

8.1 Footwear x Mental Health: A Collaboration

The final phase of this thesis research was the "Footwear x Mental Health" social media campaign. With May observed as Mental Health Awareness month, the purpose of the campaign was to utilize social media/digital tools to empower those inspired by sneaker culture to contribute to the conversation of mental health through the lens of footwear. Considering the feedback from the workshop, engaging with mental health through this approach on a digital platform was done to present the topic in way that is less intimidating. The campaign aimed to interest others in participating in the conversation.

A call to action was conveyed for people to participate in the campaign. To participate, interested persons were encouraged to:

- Post a sneaker (designed, already owned, or one they admire) on the social media platform of their choice (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or LinkedIn). Along with the picture, we encouraged participants to include one to two sentences about how the sneaker relates to mental health and wellness to them.
- We also provided the prompts below to aid people in gathering their thoughts:
    o How does this sneaker inspire you or a friend in overcoming a difficult situation?
    o Describe how this sneaker makes you feel.
    o How can footwear provide an innovative approach to destigmatizing mental health?

To collect social media participation, we asked everyone to include in their posts the hashtags: #FootwearXMentalHealth, #MentalHealthAwareness, and #BlackMentalHealthMatters. Then, we encouraged people to pass the challenge along to at least two people – encouraging them to share how their sneakers collaborate with mental health and wellness.

8.2 Campaign Results

To present a clear and concrete analysis of the campaign's results, I have chosen to examine campaign posts on Twitter – the platform with the most campaign participation. Participation, in relation to this campaign, is defined as an individual posting an image of a sneaker on social media along with a brief story of its relation to mental health. With the campaign lasting for an overall length of 17 days (May 22, 2019 – June 7, 2019), I will dissect its results according to weeks: Week 1 (May 22 – May 29) and Week 2 (May 30 – June 7). During these two weeks, I will highlight findings which include the amount of participation and any emerging themes/key words. Later in the writing, I will then present an analysis of the sentiments shared by campaign participants on social media and how they influenced the proposed hypothesis.

The campaign began on May 22, 2019 as a grassroots effort soliciting participation.

Let's talk about mental health through footwear (a thread):

Figure 5-1: First Tweet of the Campaign

Within two days, there were 7 participants on Twitter who shared short stories about how their sneakers relate to mental health. These stories each conveyed messages relating to mood, creativity, personality, and even hardship. The similarities they shared enabled these statements to be organized into the following themes: hues (colors), reflection, and empowerment.
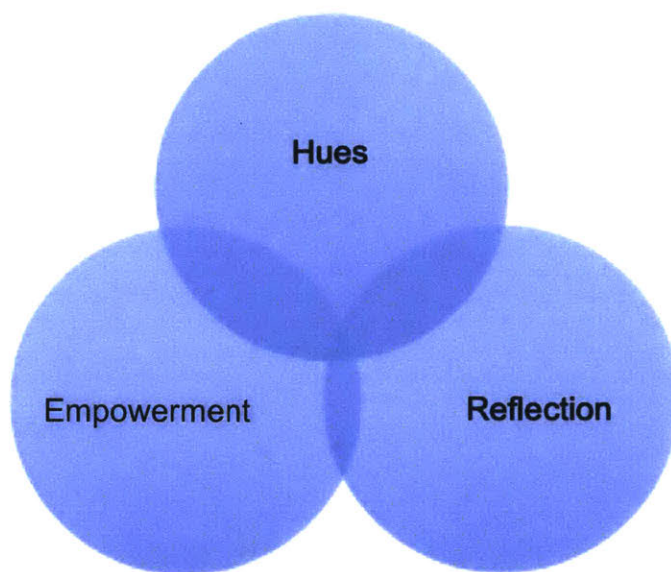
Figure 5-2: Emerging Themes in Week One of Campaign

In the findings, many of these participants shared stories reflecting on times when they experienced low confidence or esteem. Choosing to use words, such as "rough" and "demanding," they often considered their sneakers to be reminders of their strength and ability to endure difficult situations. The empowerment gained from wearing their sneakers made them, as one participant described, "feel unstoppable."

Never really been an Adidas type girl but I must say that I really adore these falcons x adidas that I own. They're super cute and comfy. When I wear them, I feel unstoppable. For me, the color pink radiates a sense of peace and love. #blackmentalhealthmatters

Figure 5-3: Social Media Campaign Participants Share How Their Sneaker
Relates to Mental Health (Example 1)

When facing challenges relating to mental health, feelings of empowerment and motivation can lead to positive outcomes. Various hues, or colors, can as well – which several participants mentioned within their narratives. For example, one participant shared how "the color pink [in my sneakers] radiates a sense of peace and love." Nearly 78% of images posted for the campaign were of sneakers with bright tones – such as pink, teal, and orange. These feelings of uplift reflect a positive mindset and "a better mood," as described in another tweet.

My Have a Nike Day Air Max Ones! The colors alone put me in a better mood and the play on "Have a nice day" just reminds me to enjoy the day & take advantage of the day that I've been blessed to see!
#footwearXmentalhealth
#blackmentalhealthmatters
#mentalhealthmatters

Figure 5-4: Social Media Campaign Participants Share How Their Sneaker Relates to Mental Health (Example 2)

Reflection is another theme that describes the tweets during the first week of the campaign. Participants many times used the word "remind" to explain how their sneakers inspired them to experience a period of reflection. In the image above, as shared by a participant, the "play on "Have a nice day" reminds me to enjoy the day & take advantage of the day that I've been blessed to see!" Stories, such as this, exemplify the feelings participants commonly expressed in relation to how their sneakers gave them a boost of confidence when faced with life's trials. Interestingly, the sneakers they chose to share in relation to mental health were those which reminded them of their self-worth and served as a source of inspiration.

Week 2

Entering Week 2 of the campaign, I sought to understand the campaign's evolution between May 30, 2019 – June 7, 2019. To begin the week and solicit more participation – I, along with the MIT Media Lab communications and video production teams, launched a video highlighting the campaign and encouraging people to join in the discussion.

Figure 5-5: Social Media Campaign Video

During this week, participation increased with 6 individuals posting images and descriptions of how their sneakers relate to mental health. The stories shared by these participants also included words relating to hues (colors), reflection, and empowerment (similar to week 1); however, the stories evolved to being more personal and connecting to various social issues. Therefore, two additional themes were included to summarize the stories of the campaign: trauma and time.
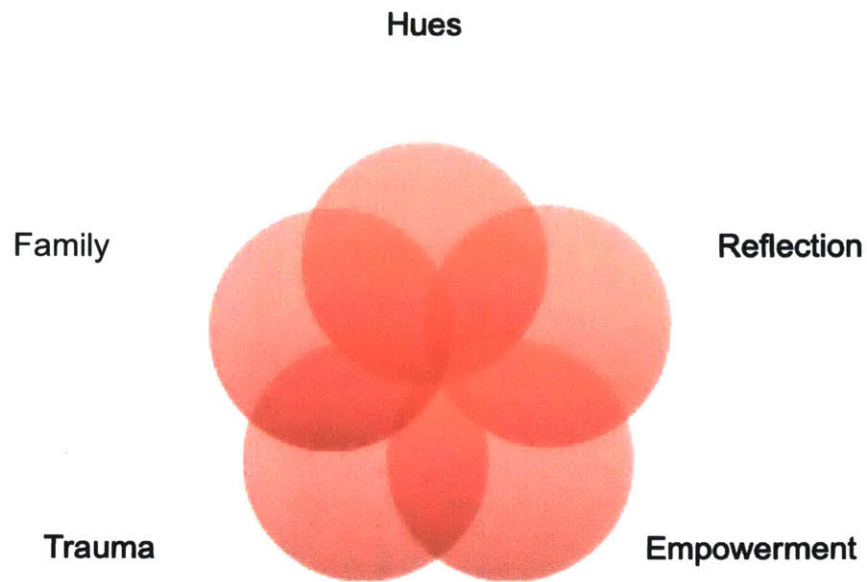
Figure 5-6: Emerging Themes in Weeks One and Two Combined

As the campaign progressed into its second week, stories from participants shifted from the expression of internal feelings of confidence and esteem to external experiences that has affected them and/or their family mentally. In particular, one participant shared how cancer has affected the lives and mental health of numerous people in their family. They dedicated the image of the sneaker to their family, as they stand together against cancer and talk about their experience(s) with mental health. They, too, discuss the colors of the shoe – which was mentioned previously as a common theme amongst posts – in honor of prostate cancer. The shoe, in the next figure, presented was described by the participant as "sneakers that transcend generations," similar to a story shared by another participant.

Figure 5-7: Social Media Campaign Participants Share How Their Sneaker
Relates to Mental Health (Example 3)

This story was one about their experience with gun-related trauma after being shot in the foot almost three decades ago. The shoe shared was described as a "fragile reminder" of how sneakers have evolved over time since the incident occurred. Gun-related violence has increasingly been in the spotlight within society today. The trauma that exists as a result is oftentimes overlooked. Gun-related trauma is a mental health issue that, to many like this participant, is personally connected to their sneakers.

The findings of the 17-day campaign gave great insight into how individuals would engage with the topic of mental health through the perspective of sneakers on a social platform. As time passed, participants began to be more transparent and share some tough stories with others. The one aspect of the campaign that did not quite catch momentum on Twitter was its virality. At the start of the campaign, people were encouraged to tag two friends within their post on the social network of their choice. 21.4% of participants tagged at least one friend, yet only 12.5% of those tagged joined

in participating. Although this was only the statistics for the Twitter platform, passing along the challenge to other friends is a tactic that will be reevaluated.

8.3 Sentiments about Black Mental Health

The technical contribution of this research aims to deeply evaluate if the campaign had any impact on the research question, "How can sneakers help destigmatize the conversation surrounding mental health in the African American community?" As mentioned in the writing, I argue that the cultural connection of sneakers will aid in this de-stigmatization and contribute positively to the conversation. Therefore, the primary focus of this section is on the sentiments shared by campaign participants. Specifically, I sought to answer:

- How do sentiments in response to the mental health campaign differ from other statements about Black mental health that are outside of the campaign?
- When compared to other discussions about sneakers, how do the sentiments from the campaign contribute to the conversation?

With participants including the hashtag, #BlackMentalHealthMatters (a common hashtag used within the Black community when discussing topics related to mental health) in their tweets, we could track the campaign's impact on the topic. In order to properly evaluate this hypothesis, tweets related to the research were scraped from Twitter and sentiment analysis tools were applied to assess their collective contribution to Black mental health on the platform.

Analyzing this data was done by comparing two lengths of time, found in the figure below, during Mental Health Awareness month. Timepoint A, or the first 10 days of the month, was selected because the beginning of the month is when engagement with mental health is expected to be higher. To have even lengths of time, Timepoint B is also comprised of a duration of 10 days – which includes the latter part of the campaign as well.

The first task of the analysis included retrieving tweets from Twitter. To do so, a Python 3 library known as "GetOldTweets3" was utilized (Mottl). This library was selected as the tool of choice due to its ability to access old tweets beyond a week's time. It also enables us to search tweets with the specific hashtags participants were encouraged to post. Other features of the library include retrieving tweets between dates, retrieving a specific amount of tweets, and accessing tweets by usernames.

Timepoint A	Timepoint B
First 10 days of May (May 1, 2019 – May 17, 2019)	10 days prior to the last day of the campaign (May 22 - June 7, 2019)
95 tweets gathered	112 tweets gathered

Table 5.1: Description of Timepoints A and B in Analysis

Using the #blackmentalhealthmatters hashtag, I gathered tweets for Timepoint A and Timepoint B. For example, via a command line utility, I conducted a query search on the hashtag between the dates for Timepoint A (May 1-17, 2019). The same was done for Timepoint B between May 22, 2019 and June 7, 2019. All tweets gathered were generated into a csv file, cleaned, and formatted before applying sentiment analysis techniques to measure the impact of the sentiments shared.

The VADER Sentiment Analysis tool was used to evaluate sentiments expressed on Twitter (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). "VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool that is *specifically attuned to sentiments expressed in social media*" (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). With this tool – positive, neutral, and negative scores are computed for each tweet to "set standardized thresholds for classifying sentences" (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). These thresholds values are described in the table below:

Positive Sentiment	Neutral Sentiment	Negative Sentiment
Compound score >= 0.05	Compound score > -0.05 and compound score < 0.05	Compound score <= -0.05

Table 5.2: Description of Sentiment Computed Scores

"The compound score is computed by summing the valence scores of each word in the lexicon, adjusted according to the rules, and then normalized to be between -1 (most extreme negative) and +1 (most extreme positive)" (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). This score will be the metric used to determine the positive, neutral, or negative sentiment of each tweet. The compound score is useful for classifying sentences and is considered as a "normalized, weighted composite score" (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014).

Findings

Once the VADER Sentiment Analysis tool was installed, the tweet analysis began. For the tweets gathered during Timepoint A, 46% of tweets had a compound score that concluded with a positive sentiment. Additionally, the percentages of neutral and negative tweets were 37% and 18%, respectively. During this time period, many sentiments shared were closely related to information about events or programs aimed at addressing mental health. For example, one Twitter user shared their excitement about being a part of a mental health summit – which resulted in a neutral score.

```
{
  "text": "HYPE to be a presenter at the Minority Mental Health Summit in Birmingham July 17 & 18.",
  "vs_neg": 0,
  "vs_pos": 0,
  "vs_neu": 1,
  "vs_compound": 0
},
```

Figure 5-8: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 1)

Additional sentiments sought to spread information about searching for a black therapist, while others informed people about different media platforms discussing

mental health. The tweets within this time period contained resources for individuals looking to improve mental health, as well as cultural competence within the field. There were also tweets that mentioned the role of politics in relation to mental health, highlighting public figures who are supporters of Black mental health. The image below is of a user's tweet commending Stacey Abrams for being an advocate for marginalized communities in the voting process.

```
{
  "text": "Thank you staceyabrams for continuing to advocate for the
  impoverished silenced unheard disenfranchised marginalized ostracized
  and so on and ensuring that their vote counts.",
  "vs_neg": 0,
  "vs_pos": 0.181,
  "vs_neu": 0.819,
  "vs_compound": 0.5945
},
```

Figure 5-9: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 2)

Several tweets from Twitter users shared words to uplift those engaging with mental health. In the images below, the tweets seek to encourage others to "have a terrific day" and remind them that it's not unusual to have a bad day. Regardless, one should strive to make it the best day possible. Both tweets indicate a positive compound score.

```
{
  "text": "Its ok not to be ok 7 days a week.",
  "vs_neg": 0,
  "vs_pos": 0.423,
  "vs_neu": 0.577,
  "vs_compound": 0.5267
},
```

Figure 5-10: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 3)

```
{
    "text": "No matter what your plans are today remember to have a terrific day.",
    "vs_neg": 0.143,
    "vs_pos": 0.273,
    "vs_neu": 0.584,
    "vs_compound": 0.25
},
```

Figure 5-11: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 4)

Though there were some inspirational and uplifting tweets within this time period, the tweets were few and vague. Compared to the tweets within Timepoint A, there was a 13% increase in positive sentiment and a 3% decrease in negative sentiment for tweets during the Timepoint B period. The overall results of this time period were:

- positive sentiment of tweets – 59%;
- neutral sentiment of tweets – 25%;
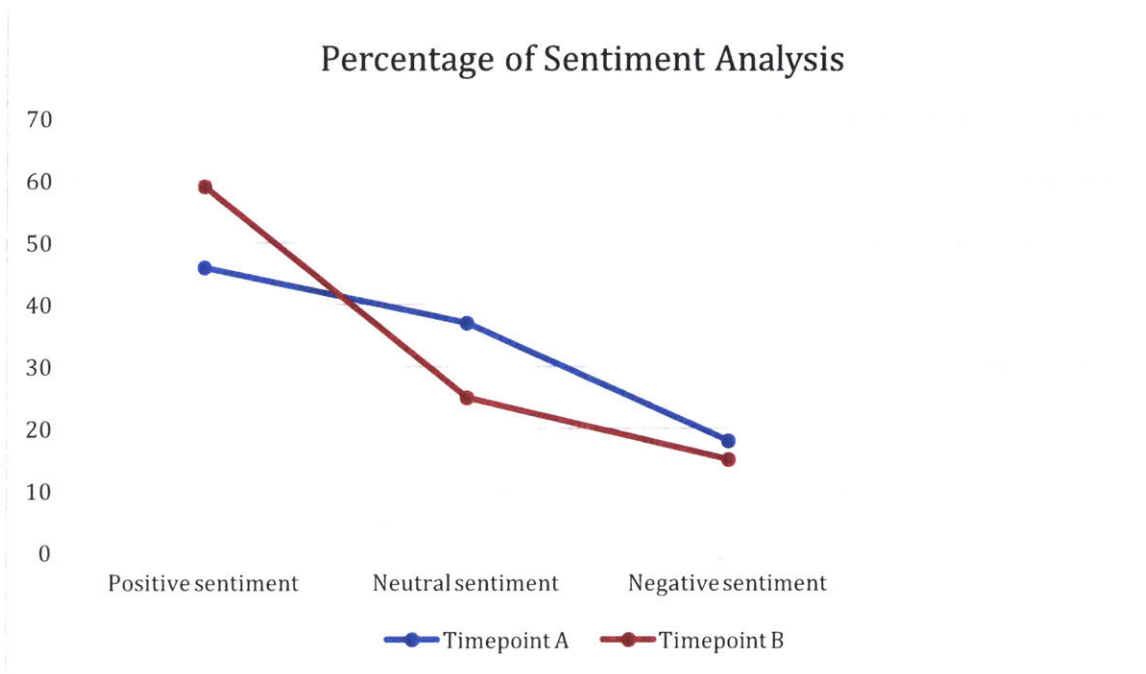- and negative sentiment of tweets – 15%.

Figure 5-12: Sentiment Analysis Comparison of Timepoint A to Timepoint B

There were many sentiments, similar to those in Timepoint A, which shared information about mental health events and resources. Twitter users also highlighted additional people who are advocating for African Americans in mental health policy.

```
{
  "text": "Thank you TherealTaraji for being honest in your testimony and using your platform to influence policy
          It's vital that we talk about the lack of mental health resources in our black/brown communities and
          discuss ways to implement more resources.",
  "vs_neg": 0.051,
  "vs_pos": 0.177,
  "vs_neu": 0.773,
  "vs_compound": 0.6908
},
```

Figure 5-13: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 5)

The number of uplifting messages during this time period surpassed the amount within Timepoint A. However, the tweets shared during our campaign provided more personal accounts about mental health.

```
{
  "text": "My Have a Nike Day Air Max Ones The colors alone put me in a better mood and the play on
          Have a nice day just reminds me to enjoy the day & take advantage of the day that
          I've been blessed to see.",
  "vs_neg": 0.038,
  "vs_pos": 0.33,
  "vs_neu": 0.632,
  "vs_compound": 0.9349
},
```

Figure 5-14: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 6)

```
{
  "text": "Never really been an Adidas type girl but I must say that I really adore these falcons x adidas that I own
          Theyre super cute and comfy When I wear them I feel unstoppable For me the color pink radiates a sense
          of peace and love.",
  "vs_neg": 0.036,
  "vs_pos": 0.418,
  "vs_neu": 0.546,
  "vs_compound": 0.9799
},
```

Figure 5-15: Sentiment Analysis of Tweets (Example 7)

These personal accounts each received highly positive compound scores and contributed to the overall discussion of Black mental health on Twitter. This percentage

increase help support the notion that the cultural significance of sneakers can lead to destigmatizing mental health conversations by adding more positive sentiments.

Campaign vs. Sneaker Conversations

In addition to evaluating the campaign's impact on destigmatizing mental health, we also chose to evaluate its contribution to conversations about sneakers by posing the question:

"How did this campaign contribute to discussions about sneakers in terms of added sentiment rather than just aesthetic?"

To analyze this, we conducted a similar process as the one previously mentioned involving scraping tweets and using sentiment analysis tools. The "GetOldTweets3" Python library was utilized to access tweets that included the hashtag #sneakerheads. A sneakerhead is another term for a sneaker enthusiast and the hashtag is oftentimes used to identify others in the community. By querying tweets via this hashtag between the dates of May 1, 2019 and May 17, 2019, we were able to compare this set of tweets known as Timepoint C to the set of tweets included in Timepoint B.

Timepoint A	Timepoint B	Timepoint C
First 10 days of May (May 1, 2019 – May 17, 2019)	10 days prior to the last day of the campaign (May 22 - June 7, 2019)	First 10 days of May (May 1, 2019 – May 17, 2019)
95 tweets gathered from #blackmentalhealthmatters query search	112 tweets gathered from #blackmentalhealthmatters query search	112 tweets gathered from #sneakerheads query search

Table 5.3: Description of Timepoints A, B, and C in Analysis

Because this hashtag is more commonly used, we retrieved a maximum number of 112 tweets to measure impact when compared to the tweets of Timepoint B. The results from our findings concluded that the tweets from Timepoint C compared to those from

Timepoint B were less positive with a percentage of 30%. Their neutral score was 26% higher than the score of Timepoint B, and the negative compound score resulted in a 4% increase.
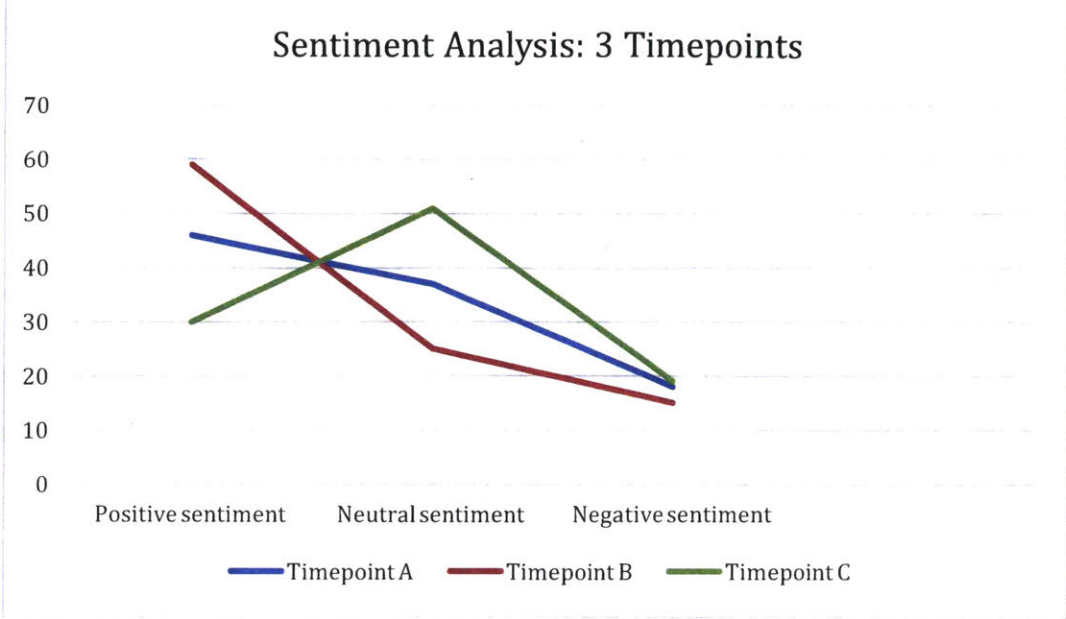

Figure 5-16: Sentiment Analysis Comparison of Timepoint A, Timepoint B, and Timepoint C

The sentiments within this time period related mostly to sneakers and its authenticity. One tweet expressed how they thought a pair of sneakers were fake and unoriginal. Most tweets, however, were regarding sneaker release dates and sports. The #sneakerheads hashtag is not only used to discuss sneakers, but also topics relevant to the sneakerhead community.

Chapter 9:

Conclusion and Future Work

Mental health is an issue that more people are seeking to highlight and address. However, the issue can be highly exclusionary in its engagement tactics by continuing to use traditional approaches with people of various cultural backgrounds. This research seeks to unleash how footwear can provide an innovative pathway for African Americans to engage with mental health. With mental health being a deeply complex issue that can be approached in different ways, our approach is not presented as a solution to the issue. Instead, it can provide a new perspective to how we define engagement with mental health for various communities.

This approach has impacted the character of discussion about Black mental health on social media (e.g. Twitter) by shifting the discussion to reflect sentiments related to experiences and emotion. Shedding light on the experiences of participants, such as gun-related trauma and cancer impacting a family, may inspire others to engage in conversations about mental health that are beyond the surface of the topic itself; and in ways which allow them to freely share their personal mental health experiences with trusted individuals or a trusted community. By discussing and engaging with mental health through a sneaker perspective, it presents a less intimidating approach to the conversation and creates a bridge to an uncomfortable topic.

The evaluation of this work primarily seeks to measure the impact of the "Footwear x Mental Health" social media campaign by exploring three main questions:

1. How can sneakers help destigmatize the conversation surrounding mental health in the Black community?
2. How do sentiments in response to the social media campaign differ from those outside of the campaign?
3. How does this campaign contribute to discussions about sneakers in terms of added sentiment rather than just aesthetic?

By scraping and accessing tweets from Twitter and utilizing sentiment analysis tools, we compared tweets shared for different time periods during the month of May, also known as Mental Health Awareness month. The results showed that the social media campaign had a significant impact on the sentiments shared about Black mental health and it also expanded the way sneakers are discussed. The connection between sneakers and mental health resulted in more positive expression of sentiment when discussing mental health and also when engaging in conversations about sneakers.

The analyzed results presented in this work can provide a foundation for moving the research forward. The overall goal of this research is to contribute to the conversation of Black mental health in order to lessen the stigma surrounding the topic and present a more positive discussion. The results have shown that footwear can provide more positive discussions about mental health within the Black community, and it would be interesting to explore how much deeper these conversations can go. This could be evaluated through an event held at a sneaker boutique or store where many community members go. The discussion can expand beyond the social media platform into a physical space at a trusted location. Discussions can be held in real-time with one-on-one interactions about sneakers and their relation to mental health. This could lead to interesting ideas about how to engage the community moving forward.

It would also be interesting to explore the role of gender, as it relates to mental health and sneaker culture. Over 80% of campaign participants were female, with males only accounting for a small portion. This finding also connects to the role of women in mental health, as African American women are more likely to seek mental health resources than African American men. Examining how to encourage more men to enter the discussion would be a potential next step of this work. Another potential avenue to explore is how collecting sneakers may directly have a correlation to mental illness. Many sneaker collectors will go above and beyond to get the latest sneaker or buy several pairs of the same shoe. It would be interesting to investigate the presence of mental conditions within sneaker culture.

Lastly, the knowledge gained from this thesis can be applied to other social issues with other cultural means. Establishing a connection between what seems to be two opposing topics can open a pathway toward helping to solve them. This work can be expanded to other racial and ethnic communities with different cultural artifacts to address various topics. Overall, exploring innovative approaches to exclusionary issues can help contribute to a more inclusive society.

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